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The Economic Life of the Mongo Negro
[Het Economisch Leven van den Mongo-neger]

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[title page]

[92] THE ECONOMIC LIFE OF THE MONGO NEGRO

INDUSTRY

241 One might say that nature throws into the lap of the Mongo
461 Negro everything he needs in order to exist so that he does not have
181 to exert himself in the slightest to get it. Generally speaking, he has only to look for his food in the forest, to pick it up from the ground as it were, with the exception of his bananas, manioc roots, and moma (a yam that, if it is prepared well, reminds one of potatoes) which are cultivated by his women. Hence, it is quite natural that one finds little industry among the Mongo, and that the Mongo Negro is not prepared to put the least effort into developing or perfecting in any way that centuries-old industry which already exists.

461 He can eat, and that is the main thing as far as he is concerned.
181 A lazy, inert people, effeminate to the core, each one merely living on the efforts of his many wives and female slaves, cannot have a highly developed industry.

In general, except for hunting which is undertaken primarily by the young men of the village, the Mongo Negro does not bother about anything. Eating, sleeping, looking for and listening to quarrels, carousing at gatherings with sugar-cane beer until they are picked up in a drunken state by their wives (a spectacle one also sees in civilized Europe), this is the dreary, monotonous, drowsy life of the Mongo Negro, one of the least culturally developed but at the same time one of the most highly interesting tribes of the Evenaar district if not of the whole Congo.

He loathes and despises work and is indolence personified.

461 Notwithstanding the extreme idleness of the Mongo [93] people,
462 they do have some of the industry that is necessary for their existence. However, it is on a low level and not widespread. In general, the existing industries are carried on by either the men or the women, and a man will never undertake a job belonging to the women, and vice versa. The work is not done in groups or in family units; where a branch of an industry exists, it is the concern of a single person unless more workers are necessary in order to carry out the work.

463 Division of labor is unknown, and each person works entirely on his own, without the help of a middleman. There are no laborers
[177] and certainly no artisans unless there happens to be some artisan or other who learned his trade under the government or at one or other of the Mission posts and has returned to his village after having completed his contract.

As a rule, such people do not find sufficient work in their own villages, and, as they are usually in possession of a few boxes, clothes, and pots and pans which they have acquired with the savings of their monthly salary, they play the grand gentleman in their village until their goods and chattels have been used up and worn out.

"Njolemwa Bosala," he says, "I am tired of work." "Njowa l'ompele," "I am dying of the heavy, difficult work."

Several of them there return to one or the other of the centers of the White settlers and again offer themselves as craftsmen.

554 A good craftsman has a high reputation among the natives, and his social position is even a very good one for a Negro. He is able regularly to supply food for his wife and children and also to get himself clothes.

326 Although most Negroes work individually, this is not true of the smith who has to have helpers in order to do his job.

465 Since the Mongo Negro knows nothing of wages, his helpers get
436 part of the income, consisting of mitako [a kind of metal currency] or some part of the work that has been done, either a knife or a lance, or a foot or arm ring.

I. THE SMITH'S TRADE.

326 Of the various industrial trades, that of the smith is certainly the
554 first in rank. The smith is one of the leading people [94] in the village and one of the inevitable persons to have a decisive voice in village affairs whether in settling differences or in meetings.

In fact, the smith is the only one of the Mongo Negroes who works regularly and does not rest on his oars. From what he earns he is able to buy quite a number of wives, and he is regarded as one of the village heads whose wishes must be consulted.

326 Whereas with us the village inn is the place where the affairs of
521 the week are noisily debated, it is at the smithy where the Mongo
571 Negroes congregate. There the elders gather -- the younger men have no voice here; there the various differences about (or among) wives and the impending taxes are discussed; amidst the billows of smoke --- drawn with deep puffs out of their huge bamboo pipes -- the smith is the only one who works on and earns his living nobly.

326 The smith is the most judicious craftsman among the Mongo
428 Negroes.

His trade is practically the only one which is a family affair and is passed on from father to son. If a smith does not have any children, the business is taken over by his younger brother.

This right of inheritance is by no means general in the other trades; the trade of the smith is inherited while the others are taken up by any Tom, Dick, or Harry who happens to have a liking for them.

325 The smithy where the smith plies his trade is a wide oblong dark
348 hut (about five meters by ten meters) built alongside the public highway. In contrast with the other dwellings of the Negroes, the floors of which are generally built about 20 centimeters above the road, the floor of the smithy is dug out from 30 to 70 centimeters below the level of the road so that one goes down a step from the road into the smithy.

The reason why the floor of the smithy should be dug out in this way is not quite clear to me, but most probably it is to prevent the danger of fire when the storm winds that accompany the heavy tropical rains sweep through the huts. By digging out the floor in this way, an earthen enclosure about half a meter high is formed around the smithy, and this protects the smith from the wind and enables him to continue quietly at work.

325 In spite of the primitiveness of his tools [95] and the primitive manipulation of them, the smith knows how to get what he needs from his implements. The forge (lotulu) is constructed as follows: a block of wood is cut about 60 centimeters long, 40 centimeters wide, and 30 centimeters high, with a hollow pipe, half a meter long, connected to it. This is all formed of one piece. With the aid of a banana stalk, on which the clay is moulded, a smith's pipe is formed. The banana stalk is removed from the clay, and the hollow pipe (boongo) remains. Two, sometimes four, bellows (njasa) are placed on the

325 wooden block. These bellows have the openings covered with the dried hide of some wild animal to which piston rods (biongonga) have been attached. The "biongonga" are pushed up and down in quick tempo by two men to make the draft that fans the little charcoal fire.

In front of the "boongo" the smith (botuli) has dug a kind of trench in which the little charcoal fire is laid. In this fire the iron ore, European iron, and copper sticks (njele-mitakos) are smelted.

Botuli atula la lotulo: "The smith forges with the forge."

325 439 In former times when it was not possible for the Mongo to get European iron, iron ore (bikense bia bokili) was dug out of the forest and heated to melting point in the smithy. Impurities which came to the top were skimmed off, and in this manner the Mongo Negro got his iron. Today, now that the Negro can get his iron so easily from the various trading-posts, he prefers to work with European iron. The imported iron makes a better product, and the Negro no longer has to take the trouble of going to look for his ore. Indeed, the Mongo smith would no longer be able to dispose of lances made of native iron ore because the imported iron is so much better.

325 The implements the smith uses are as follows.

1. Boengwa: the small pounding iron.
2. Loaka: the large pounding iron.
3. Etulaka: the sledgehammer.
4. Eala: the anvil.
5. Lingwata: a hammer which is very much like a European hammer and serves the same purpose.
6. Kongwa: a split stick used to get the hot iron out of the fire and to hold it tightly during the forging.

An iron [96] ring or a piece of liana is placed around the split stick and pushed down to hold the hot object as tightly as possible while it is being forged.

7. Loseno: chisel.
8. Losio: small chisel fastened on a stick, with which the decorations on knives, lances, and rings are carved.
9. Jyoka: the implement chest, a nicely finished box with a lid and a European lock.

000 The objects of iron made by the Mongo smith are as follows.

326 411 The objects of iron made by the Mongo smith are as follows.

Bibui: all that is of iron

1. Likula: arrow.
2. Bosuki: arrow for hunting pigs; also used to cut copal and spear fish.
3. Bongelo: lance.
4. Ifombolo: lance.
5. Mpokwankoi: lance.
6. Liswa: axe.

326 412 Jokula: knives

1. Mombi; 2. Boli; 3. Bolengwa; 4. Lingonda; 5. Limenga; 6. Likodzi; 7. Efamba; 8. Momba; 9. More little knives; 10. Lizangi.

Basongo: needles

[413]
1. Ingwala.
2. Lokili: tattooing needle.
3. Jyolo: small needle to get flea beetles out of the feet.
4. Efoli: small pin.

326 534 301 [789] Ngonga: bells

1. Ngonga ea tosisi: bells worn on the hips by women and children so that as they walk the ringing will keep away the evil spirits.
2. Bongonga: a bell attached to the point of a war-lance which makes it like the head of a walking-stick but upside down.
3. Lingwete: little round bell worn on the wrist by men.
4. Elondza ea itumba: the war-bell. An oblong pipe [97] in the form of a long cup attached to a stick. It is struck with a piece of soft wood, and the sound travels surprisingly far.

These bells are all made of wrought iron.

326 The native smith works not only with iron but also with copper which he melts down in the same manner from copper sticks (longele: mitako) and old, worn copper rings.

[439 435] The copper sticks, that nowadays sell at 30 for a franc, come from Europe; copper ore is unknown here.

The copper objects made by the smith are as follows.

326 301 Bakonga: all that is of copper

1. Bongombwa: necklace, often weighing ten kilograms or more; value, 1,000 mitako.
2. Lokolo: leg ring, weighing four to six kilograms and more; value, 200 to 500 mitako.
3. Bolongu: arm ring, not heavy.
4. Ingwete: arm ring, not heavy.
5. Bongenza: leg ring that rattles when the wearer walks.
6. Bosankere: leg ring.
7. Limpala: great leg rings in spiral form, twisted out of thick copper wire, which cover the whole of the lower leg. They bear much resemblance to the springs in a mattress. Among the Negroes [435] these have a value of 500 mitako.
8. Bompulenge: resembling a small limpala, these were formerly worn on the arms by old people, but they are now out of fashion and no longer made.

326 554 In the whole district there is only one smith, a certain Elumbu in the village Lilangi (Basankusu), who knows how to make copper bells. This Black is a celebrity to every Mongo Negro.

According to the Negroes, there is a smith, a certain Bokedzu from the vicinity of the Ikelemba River, who knew how to put a new rifle together from the parts of old broken ones and did so successfully. According to the Negroes, the government agent, however, took the rifle away from him, but in my opinion, and in that of others, this black [577] rifle manufacturer belongs in the realm of fable, the more so as a Negro is not at all afraid of a lie.

[98] II CARPENTRY.

335 Carpentry plays an important part in the life of the Mongo Negro. The primitive utensils in his house as well as his canoe and his lokole (the Negro telephone with which he spreads his thoughts from village to village) are made of wood.

The making of the canoe and the lokole takes a great deal of work.

The Canoe.

313 The following three kinds of wood, namely, (1) Bokeswa, (2)
396 Lifake, (3) Bomposo, make a good canoe, especially Bokeswa. This tree is much sought after because its wood makes a strong, light canoe.

The Negro who wants a canoe goes into the forest, picks out a nice slender tree, brings out his axe, and fells at his leisure the tree he has chosen. He hacks off the unnecessary branches and hollows the tree out in the rough form of the canoe. (Aulems watu: he shapes the canoe.)

[476] He calls some of his friends together, and they proceed, for payment, of course (nothing for nothing, says the Negro), to hollow out the tree.

396 When they have finished hollowing out the tree, the owner of the canoe calls the wongiwa biatu, the proper canoe maker, a heavy man and one of some account among his fellow villagers. This wongiwa biatu gives a nice, slender form to the canoe with his axe, planes it off nicely, and with the help of the esuwa, a small axe, marks off the edge of the canoe with sharp, short, regular grooves.

483 Often the Negroes make their canoes hours away from the
476 nearest water. In order to transport it, they place sticks on the ground and draw the canoe over them. In addition to a number of strong men, all the spes patriae [hope of the fatherland] of the village help with this task. They get a mitako as a reward and feel themselves on top of the world.

396 The canoe maker is well paid, the price reckoned according to
476 the size of the canoe. Several dogs are slaughtered at the expense of

the owner, and everyone who has helped gets his share according to the amount of work he has done. [99] Frequently a big sugar-cane beer spree is started, where disgusting scenes often take place until finally the drunken men are taken home by their wives. In civilized Europe it is sometimes not much better.

Boats are made just large enough for two men, as well as others sufficient for a hundred or even a hundred and fifty men. The big war canoes of the great chief Evuloko of Waka and of the former chief of Bandaka, a certain Isaempoko, are known throughout the region. The war canoe of the latter was said to hold a hundred and fifty men, and the edge of this canoe to reach up to the shoulders of a fairly tall Negro. The ordinary canoe in which Whites travel is, as a rule, sufficiently large for twenty to thirty oarsmen.

The prices of canoes vary, according to size and strength, from 200 to 10,000 mitako.

The lokole

The lokole plays a very large part in the life of the Negro. Without the lokole, the life of the Negro would be inconceivable.

The lokole can be best described as the public telephone with which the Negro makes his thoughts known publicly from village to village.

The lokole is to the Negro what the trumpet signal is to the soldier.

The lokole calls the men to meetings, to war, and to the hunt; the lokole calls all the people, great and small, to the dance. During the dance it is the loyal accompanist until deep in the night; its monotonous sound brings the enthusiasm of the dancers almost to the point of frenzy.

The Negro telephones his friends at great distances and explains what he wants. If two Negroes from the same village or from different villages have a quarrel, they abuse each other over the lokole, and the whole world is kept fully up-to-date on the details of the dispute. Each one tries to blacken the reputation of the other in the eyes of the other villagers. If someone dies in the village, it is proclaimed everywhere the whole night through, by means of the lokole, that

342 so-and-so has died. Hours before his actual death, people everywhere know that a certain person is on his deathbed and that his death is imminent.

[100] If the witch doctor is up to his tricks of duping the silly Negro, people everywhere around know just what nonsense he is performing at what moment.

The White announces his morning and midday orders by means of the lokole and tells his workers when they may cease work for the day by the same means.

In the mornings and evenings and in the case of wet weather, the lokole carries especially far, but in the full sun it is not so effective.

242 534 The lokole is a large block of wood which is split down the middle for almost the whole of its length, and the inside part is carefully hollowed out. The lokole has the shape of an extra long, open mussel shell although, in general, the outside edges are flattened out.

322 The making of lokole is the trade of a certain person, and some Negroes are well-known for the lokole they have made.

Only four kinds of wood are suitable for the making of a lokole. [324] These are (1) Bokungu; (2) Likoso; (3) Bolondo; and (4) Isi. The last [326] is the most excellent kind of wood and the one used by the Mongo Negro to manufacture his "ngula" (red dye) with which he smears his body for even the least important event that occurs in his village. The Isi is probably a species of redwood. The Mongo Negro makes 322 534 five different lokole: (1) Ingonga, small in shape; (2) lokole ja losali, medium size; (3) bongungu, large lokole. These three are all like the one described above. They are struck with sticks (bosolu) from the "momamba" tree (umbrella tree). (4) Bonkuka is the large, high lokole that is struck with two sticks to the ends of which are attached several balls of caoutchouc. The sound of these lokole carries for the greatest distance. (5) Ngomo is the large, oblong, upright dance lokole. This lokole is simply a large, oblong piece of wood, completely hollowed out, decorated a little, about 1.25 meters high, and covered at the top with a piece of dried antelope or leopard skin. It is struck with the fingers and the palm of the hand. This lokole is the well-known tom-tom, still used by the Negroes on the steamboats to announce their arrival in the villages along the river.

202 197 And now something about lokole language.

The beat of the lokole varies, and it is by this means that the Negroes [101] understand the different words. The tempo varies also.

287
198 The White hears only the difference in tempo, nothing more. The Negro miles away understands what is being telephoned.

The lokole language consists chiefly of metaphors and is thus not intelligible to any White in the whole of the Congo. The Negroes are proud of their invention and also pleased that the White, who otherwise can do everything, is not able to understand their lokole.

Every man has his own name (nkombo) on the lokole with which he makes himself known. Because such a name often covers several lines of script, chiefly expressed in metaphors giving facts of the public life of the Negro concerned, it would be a physical impossibility for a White to master the lokole language in the way a Negro does. Actually, not even all Negroes understand the art of beating the lokole.

[462] The women have a general name; beating the lokole is only for the men, and no woman understands the art. The women understand what is being broadcast when the lokole is beaten, but they cannot beat it themselves. Moreover, they would be ashamed to attempt it; this is no task for a woman, and they would be laughed at. The lokole name, or nkombo, of the woman is as follows:

Bali la tolombo basalaki lisala, basalaki tomboloko, tond' al' isusu, befambe eka lisala.

"Women in numbers, worked the garden, prepared much to eat, consisting of bananas, to eat out of the garden."

A White, personally, has no nkombo of his own on the lokole, but to announce the arrival of a White in a village, the following is spread around far and wide:

Lolema ja lifeka feka, esongo etenaka nkola.

"The bat flies about everywhere, the pin wounds the nails of the feet."

With "the bat flies about everywhere" is to be understood the government agent who goes from village to village collecting the taxes. [726] "The pin wounds the nails of the feet" means that, just as the Negroes go on the warpath with sharp pointed sticks dipped in poison to wound the enemies' feet, the government agent is always on his rounds with his rifle, ready for the fray.

The nkombo of the Catholic missionary is as follows: [102]

(1) Bansele mele ba nkanga; (2) bofala boki ndaki lisako nda lokombo; (3) etafe bolo; (4) benanga bekendaka la mperu.

202 198 Bamele msele ba nkanga, "The one always screaming who is followed into the high grass, the strong branch, the districts go along with the priest (Father).

1. The missionary is seen here as a witch doctor (bamele msele ba nkanga is a general lokole name for the Negro witch doctor), who, like the Negro doctor, is looked upon as a doctor and a priest.

2. Bofala boki ndaki lisako nda lokombe [sic]. The priest, because he is always seeking converts everywhere, is here compared with an antelope which, when it is followed, runs around and around in the high grass.

3. Etafe holo. The missionary is here compared with a strong branch. He is strong because he is influential and highly regarded by the Negroes.

4. Benanga bekendaka la mpeto. The districts all go along with the Father (priest). They all follow his instructions.

The nkombo of the Protestant Anglican missionary is as follows:

Bofanga sembola bonanga bono nkenda l'Inglese.

"The fishing net is spread out; the country goes along with the Englishman."

In the same way as the fishing net cordons off a part of the river and everything is caught in it, so all the people go along with the Englishman. The Protestant Anglican missionary was in this district [197] before the arrival of the Catholic missionary, so this nkombo refers, of course, to this period. Since the arrival of the Catholic missionary, the situation has changed completely in this district.

These few examples give an indication of the difficulty in understanding the lokole language.

352 322 In addition, the Negro makes a few chairs, the most important of which is the lyeko la mpaka, the chair for the elder, a three-legged affair with two props under it, topped with a piece out of the umbrella tree; into this the elder can throw himself as lazily as he wishes.

Then there is the so-called ebonga, a little stool chopped out of a block of wood with the native axe. This is finished off attractively with an esumwa, a small paring chisel, and the seat is decorated around the edge with studs which have been bought in some factory or other.

[103] Occasionally one sees a native stool, made as described above, but with a kind of back rest chopped out of one piece.

The Negro who wishes to move with the times makes for his house a chair out of bamboo in the European style: some sticks stuck in the ground, a mat of split bamboo laid over them, and the gentleman can spend his days in dolce far niente [pleasant idleness].

A table made in the same way (otherwise unknown to the Negro) completes the furnishing of his hut.

One does not need to be an expert, either, in order to be able to make a Negro bed. Some straight sticks are chopped out of the mombambo (umbrella tree). These are placed lengthwise and then across, on top of each other, trimmed a bit at the edges so that the whole thing fits more or less, and it is then bound together with some split lianas. In this way the Negro has made a bed; this favorite piece of furniture is finished for a sale price of 5 to 10 mitako.

The making of beds could be classed among the Mongo trades. I once saw, in the interior, ten of these beds, large and small spread out along the side of the road for sale.

I was assured that the owner of the beds was the very best bed-maker of the village. Of course, I raised my hat to such an important personage.

The ekoba, the bed stool, is also indispensable. These ekoba take the place of our pillows and are made of one piece, formed to the shape of the head. It is a somewhat hard pillow, but the Negro head is hard and can put up with it; the fellow sleeps without having to be rocked.

To prepare his food he needs some mortars and pestles, and these are made of wood. He uses hardwood for these utensils so that the mortars do not wear away from the constant pounding.

In addition, the Negro makes his oars, his bow and arrows for the hunt, and the lokombi. The lokombi is a flat, oblong, hollowed block of wood over which some pegs are stretched [sic]. He plucks these with his fingers, thus producing a monotonous sound. This so-called musical instrument is the constant companion of the young man and accompanies him on his long treks through the Evenaar forest and on his visits to friends and acquaintances.

[104] III. WEAVING

28% The craft of the Mongo weaver is an honorable one and one that calls for much labor and attentiveness.

[117] Weaving is no longer as much in vogue as it was in earlier times, because the younger people buy European materials. However, the weaver is still able to earn his daily bread comfortably, because [94] the old people are too pagan to give up their old ingrained habit of wearing a loin cloth.

[96] Weaving is a craft carried on by men only. Some are very skillful in the weaving of materials and command our admiration. Pieces of really beautiful workmanship were offered to us for sale; I had myself seen them being woven.

28% 314 The weaver takes his knife, goes into the forest, and cuts the "mpekwa ia lifeke," the fibers of a certain kind of palm tree which he also sometimes plants on the open highway near his hut. As soon as he has sufficient fibers for the weaving he has in mind, he goes home and at his leisure scrapes the fibers with his knife until they are all of the same thickness.

28% After that he leaves them in the sun to dry. When they have dried sufficiently, he puts up in his hut or on the open highway the frame on which the fibers are to be hung.

After he has attached the fibers to the top cross-bar (they are bound between the top and bottom cross-bars), he holds down the bottom cross-bar with his foot and goes to work.

Often he uses fibers of different colors, and this gives a lovely effect to the piece of material.

Bofomi afom'eto, "the weaver is weaving material."

38% 314 *The weaver has a very simple way of giving the fibers their different colors.*

From the forest he fetches a liana (longoli) which contains the red, white, or black coloring agent, cuts it in pieces, puts them in a banana leaf which has been quickly scorched in the fire, adds some water and hangs all this, with the fibers, in a bag of banana leaves above the fire. When the dye has soaked thoroughly into the fibers, he has his colored fibers all ready [105] for the material he is about to weave. This mixture is called "boaka."

Rope-making

283 The Mongo rope-maker (one can hardly call him a profesional rope-maker) goes to the forest, fetches fibers from a certain kind of palm-tree, scrapes them nicely with his knife, and puts them in the sun to dry.

Whole coils of rope are made in this way. Native rope, finished in this manner, is of a good, strong quality. Nets for the hunt and also for fishing are made of it. As in the case of weaving, it is something done by the men only.

IV. BASKET AND MAT WEAVING

285 962 The weaving of baskets and mats is chiefly the work of the women, especially the fine braidwork.

The men make only the large, roughly finished baskets needed for the transport of their copal. The braiding of mats is done only by the women.

285 311 From the forest they fetch the twigs of the Bolongote tree, scrape them nicely or dry them in the sun, and, sitting down, braid their baskets and mats.

They make different kinds of baskets, but the raw materials necessary for braiding are the bokombe or Ikombe of the Bolongote tree.

285 One or two women together braid the mats on the flat ground. The names of the mats are as follows.

935 1. Efonzolo, the roughly finished mat (value, five mitakos).

2. Nkongolo, the finely braided mat (value, half a franc).

3. Irundi or Iofole, the little mat with which the dirt from the road and the ashes from the fire are carried away.

4. Ifefa, the little mat used to fan the fire.

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